

The Romanticism of Private McQuhrr.



HE first time I met Private McQuhrr was one evening at sundown just before parade. My attention was called to him by his captain ordering him under arrest for being drunk on duty. I remember him afterwards by the way he swore as two men led him away to the guardhouse after he had left his officer's presence.

Once after that he walked back and forth for two hours doing sentry duty in front of the officers' club when I happened to be sitting upon the veranda in a big rocking chair reading a new magazine. I looked over the corner of the magazine and "sized him up," as they say in the army. He was rather an old man, having served in the cavalry thirty years before he came to us. It was only because he was too old to re-enlist in the cavalry that he had consented to come into an infantry regiment. His face was hard and knotty and cut with the winds of many bitter winters. But if you looked into it long enough you would not call it unkind. The eyes were very restless, but they were fine eyes for all that; gray with flecks of brown in them. Although he was serving his thirty-fifth year in the army he wore no stripes of any kind except the gold service stripes upon the cuff of his dress coat. He was a heavy man and the best fighter in the garrison, having at different times nearly murdered the men who had stood up to him. A heavy drinker he was always, but no one had heard him speak evil of woman. The fact is that he never even looked toward them except from a distance, and so far as anyone knew he never wasted a thought upon the best or worst of them. This was counted strange in a soldier. No one knew much about Private McQuhrr except that he was partly educated and had come from somewhere in Scotland many years before and enlisted in the American army a few days after he had landed in New York. I asked Harry Winslow, who was the second lieutenant of H company, of which McQuhrr was a member, what he knew about the man.

"Nothing at all," said Winslow, "except that he won't stand being hit over the head with a bucket by his first sergeant, who is a Swede. The last time it happened McQuhrr nearly killed him, and I sent McQuhrr to the guardhouse for striking his superior officer. But I called the sergeant down beautifully all the same and told him that if it ever happened again I'd have the stripes off him. Can't say that I blame McQuhrr for mauling him once in a while. McQuhrr is an old man and not such a bad kind either, but he drinks like a fish."

That is absolutely all that the officers in the garrison knew of McQuhrr. The men knew very little more.

But in the long cold winter months this old soldier was not as desolate as it seemingly appeared to his comrades. Every evening that he was not marked for duty he would leave the merry group that always gathered around the big red hot stove in the company room of the barracks, where the men read the papers and played cards and told stories. Upstairs he would go to the window beside his bunk. No one was ever there, and McQuhrr had the great, silent sleeping room all to himself. He would sit on the side of his bunk and fill his pipe slowly and then light it with huge puffs like an engine starting a heavy train on slippery rails. But when he got it well lighted he would puff away very gently, only little pale blue whiffs now and then. Without anyone else knowing it Private McQuhrr went back over a great many miles of frozen prairie and tossing seas to the braes of his ain bonny Scotland. The old fellow had a memory. If you could have seen the sweet girl face that looked out from a leather case that he sometimes opened here alone you would also know that he had a touch of romanticism in his make up.

It is hard to say just what things came before the eyes of this battle old soldier. Perhaps he wandered among the white-washed cottages of some highland village, or looked out upon the Frith from some crag along the rocky shore. Or he may have been picking his way through purple woods with gay mist reaching out to meet the shadows on all sides. Sometimes McQuhrr relapsed into the Scotch dialect when excited, perhaps he talked in it now, gently to himself. All anyone looking out from the bar-

racks window could see was a long stretch of snow-covered prairie and the brown woods that bordered it a mile away in front, and the yellow sides and red roofs of an officers' house to the west. But here McQuhrr used to sit and watch the smoke being whirled from the long row of officers' chimneys like white plumes floating on the wind. About 5 o'clock would come the sunset turning the sky and prairie into flame. Then the bugles sounded "retreat" and the detail of the guard fired the sundown salute and lowered the flag. Out on the long piazzas the companies lined up and stood at "attention" until the flag reached the ground. Then the men again went to their cards and papers, and Private McQuhrr to his lonely seat on the edge of his bunk beside the window. McQuhrr would again fill his pipe and this time, knowing that the men never came upstairs at this hour, he would set the picture of the girl up before him on the window sill. She was a pretty girl, and although McQuhrr had probably never seen her enter a ball room in a gown of yellow satin with overdress of white Paris muslin, he no doubt considered her the most beautiful girl in the world. Here he would sit and smoke in silence, while outside the sun turned things red and gold. Then someone would come to the steps and shout:

"Dinner; fall in for dinner." McQuhrr would then go down to the big dining room and eat his dinner. But you could have found him again one hour later at the upstairs window with his pipe.

One day he was arrested for some slight offense and put in the guardhouse. The next day he was sent out to work in the hay fields with a squad of prisoners who were serving long terms, and who were, perhaps, some of the most desperate men who ever saw the inside of a military prison. There was only one guard and he sat under a tree and rested his rifle across his knees. The cutters worked gradually over toward the river bank. Then, while the eyes of the guard were still upon them, two of them dashed for the shelter of the willows and cottonwood that grew along the bank. The other four prisoners scattered and laid down in the long grass. McQuhrr stood perfectly still. He was too old a soldier to do anything rash and besides he had no wish to escape. The two men had entirely disappeared when the guard jumped to his feet and fired his rifle. Three times he fired and when the smoke cleared away there was nothing before his eyes but a high field of yellow grass.

When the officer of the day and a detail of the guard reached the spot they found the four men crouching in the grass. They also found McQuhrr. He was laying on his face with a bullet hole in his chest and the opening between his shoulders, where it had come out. They carried him to the guard house for some reason instead of to the hospital and he was still unconscious when the surgeon arrived.

"There's nothing I can do for him," said the doctor. "He can't live an hour."

"Couldn't we get him out of here?" asked the Lieutenant Winslow, who had come over as soon as he found out it was one of his men. "It seems a shame to let the old fellow die in a place like this."

"Oh," said the surgeon a little impatiently, "is that your reason?" Then he added quite impassively, "I think we will just let him remain where he is."

Winslow was young and impulsive; the surgeon had seen thirty years of service.

A few minutes later, McQuhrr opened his eyes and tried to speak. "What is it, McQuhrr?" asked Winslow, bending over him.

"Could you raise my head a bit, sir?" he asked.

The officer raised his head and McQuhrr ran his hand into his breast pocket and took out the picture in the leather case.

"The face was completely demolished by the bullet," said Winslow, when telling me of it, "but I don't think he knew it, because he didn't know me when I spoke to him again."

However, McQuhrr clasped it in his hand and leaned back and said softly: "Oh but she was a bonny lassie."

He turned his face wearily to the barred window and looked dreamily out upon the sunset prairie.

"My ain sweet lassie," he said. And while the bugles outside were sounding "first call" for parade, and the young officer was pulling on his white Berlin gloves, Private McQuhrr answered here at the last roll call.

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